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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the new Sri Lankan General Certificate of Education (GCE) O-Level standardized test of English focuses on how new ideas in testing have been implemented in the test and on their effect on classroom practice and the quality of English instruction. The discussion begins with a brief outline of the history and context in which the new exam was introduced. The second section describes the most notable features of the examination of a new O-level syllabus from a practical perspective, including the test's careful integration into the school curriculum, time allocation, test construction, and item types. It is concluded that based on the limited experience to date and anecdotal evidence, the test is having an effect on classroom practice. The need for substantial additional effort in developing public and professional awareness is seen, but difficulty in implementing change is anticipated due to limited resources. (MSE)

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SRI LANKAN ENGLISH O LEVEL: LEVER FOR CHANGE

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS.

ETHEL NANAYAKKARA
RICHARD WEBBER

Introduction

Section 1	-	History and Context (RW)
Section 2	-	Description of the new examination and its production (EN)
Section 3	-	Concluding Generalisations (RW)

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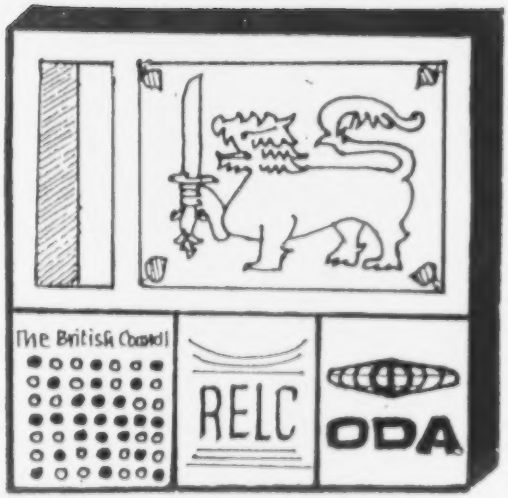

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SRI LANKAN ENGLISH O LEVEL: LEVER FOR CHANGE
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INTRODUCTION

The paper which I and my colleague are presenting today is a description of how new ideas in examination practice have been implemented in the Sri Lankan GCE English O Level with the purpose of effecting changes in classroom practice and of improving the quality of English Language learning across Sri Lanka. However this paper is not directly concerned with the nature of these new ideas; indeed such so-called "New Ideas" as, say, Proficiency Bandings for marking writing or differentiation within a paper will already be very familiar to this audience. We therefore believe that it may be of greater interest to this audience to understand the practical measures which were taken to ensure that these new ideas were effectively planted into GCE O Level examination practice. Nor do we make any apology for emphasising practicality. Validity, reliability and practicality are usually mentioned in the same breath but detailed consideration of the first two is normal whilst practicality is usually relegated to a few brief, perhaps apologetic, comments. The intention of this paper is to redress this balance and to provide a description that will emphasise the importance of practical measures. After all, without taking adequate notice of the constraints and opportunities inherent in a consideration of the practicalities involved in any examination, wasted effort or failure will almost inevitably result.

This paper will be presented in three sections. The first will consist of a brief outline of the history and context in which the New O Level was introduced and will be presented by myself. The second section will describe the most notable features of the examination of a new English O Level syllabus from a very largely practical point of view. This central section will be presented by my colleague, Mrs. Ethel Nanayakkara. And the last section, presented by myself, will make some brief concluding generalisations.

(1) HISTORY AND CONTEXT

So, we come to the first section of the paper - the history and context in which we have attempted to effect change. After Sri Lanka's Independence from the British in 1948, there existed an attitude of ambiguity in public policy to the English Language. This ambiguity was ended in 1957 when a policy of 'Sinhala only' was introduced - Sinhala, being the mother tongue of about 70 per cent of the nation's 16 million people. This policy persisted until the publication in 1981 of a White Paper which emphasised the importance of the English Language as one of Sri Lanka's 3 national or official languages. This White Paper was part of a new emphasis on liberating the economy and increasing Sri Lanka's links - especially trade links - with the rest of the world. English was therefore seen in its role as a language of International Communication in the service of economic development. It was in this context that the government sought to tailor the English syllabus to the new demands being placed upon it. The syllabus as it then existed emphasised the learning of grammatical forms through traditional teacher-centred classroom techniques. The main emphasis was on Reading with a lesser emphasis on Writing; Listening and Speaking skills were hardly touched on at all. The O Level Examination reflected this syllabus and consisted largely of multiple-choice items with a very short writing section which was atomistically marked. This examination may have had a good deal of reliability, in that it contained a large number of items which were objectively scored, but it was certainly not necessarily going to ensure that candidates who passed had the linguistic skills that the government was looking for in its newly outward-looking policies. And it is perhaps worth emphasising at this point the dramatic importance which certification has played and continues to play in Sri Lankan society - although Sri Lanka is by no means alone in this. It is an inescapable fact that unless a skill is known to figure significantly in determining success at an examination it will not be taught. And the corollary to this is that even if such non-examined skills were taught - for instance by an enthusiastic, skillful and perhaps idealistic teacher - they would still not be learnt - except perhaps by a very few equally idealistic pupils.

Learning is generally seen as a means of obtaining a certificate with which to get a job. Learning as a means of obtaining knowledge for its own sake is a rarely encountered concept. It is therefore quite evident that unless an examination was used as a lever, no significant change would take place as the result of any syllabus change.

So, the Government of Sri Lanka in its desire to create an outward-looking nation with access to the International Community through the medium of English as a living, rather than a book, language, initiated two parallel activities; the writing of a new series of textbooks and the simultaneous creation and implementation of an examination to test the type of skills taught in the new textbooks. In other words the policy makers had the foresight to appreciate that the development of a new examination was as important as the development of a new syllabus.

New textbooks entitled 'English For Me', for children aged 8 to 10, were developed by a Sri Lankan team with assistance from NORAD, and new textbooks for children aged 11 to 15 or 16 entitled 'English Every Day', were developed by a UK/Sri Lankan team with assistance from the British Government's Overseas Development Administration and the British Council. These materials were activity based, pupil centred, reflected real life situations, emphasised the actual use of the language and placed equal emphasis on the 4 skills. The textbook writing period was, as can be well imagined, lengthy and during this period elaborate preparations were made to ensure that the O Level Examination would effectively test pupil achievement in the learning of skills taught in the new textbooks. However, this was done in an indirect manner.

The Sri Lankan authorities felt the need for an examination that would provide a way for any Sri Lankan to demonstrate to an employer, or whoever, his or her ability in English. This examination, called 'The National Certificate in English' was, and still is, an important - indeed an expanding - examination in Sri Lanka today. There is no fixed syllabus for this examination, although it is intended for candidates with an

ability level somewhat above Sri Lankan O Level. However, it is open to all, and is sat once a year. It tests the 4 skills using realistic, communicative and, we believe, attractive item types. It is, if you like, the Sri Lankan equivalent of the British Council's ELTS test or ETS's TOEFL, although it is very different in format and style to both of those examinations. Indeed it is significantly different from the new English O Level that was being planned to test the new 'English Every Day' syllabus. But, from the point of view of preparing the ground in which the new O Level was to grow, the National Certificate in English, or 'NCE' as it is referred to, was extremely useful. Twenty eight Sri Lankans were trained in testing methodology at the University of Lancaster over a 4 year period; a resident ODA-funded advisor was appointed to assist; through training programmes carried out by these staff, a pool of about 100 examiners was built up; the NCE tested all 4 skills equally; item writers were not restricted by a syllabus and were free to experiment with a wide range of item types; regular visits by Lancaster University consultants reinforced what had already been learned in UK and also monitored the examination itself and associated administrative systems; and finally techniques to ensure marker standardisation and reliability, (-as for instance, double marking and the use of Proficiency Bandings in the marking of Writing -), and a whole range of other statistical and data gathering techniques, were introduced and staff rendered thoroughly familiar with them. It is therefore evident that the work going on with the NCE, at the same time as the 'English Every Day' textbooks were being introduced, was providing a very solid foundation for the development of the new style O Level.

Now, using the experience and expertise gained from the development of the NCE, as described above, serious work on the New O Level began in 1987. The first sitting of the New O Level was on February 27th 1989 with a candidature of 197,000. The second sitting took place, just a few days ago, on 31st March 1990 with a candidature of 315,000. The candidature will probably stabilise at around 350,000 at its next sitting in December 1990. And it is in this size of candidature that we can see one of many

differences between the New O Level and the NCE, which is taken by less than 10,000 candidates per annum. The NCE was immensely helpful in assisting change in examination practice at O Level but it was by no means the same exam. Many new ideas had to be developed and problems solved before the New English O Level could become a reality and a success. And at this point, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to hand over to my colleague, Mrs. Ethel Nanayakkara, who will describe in some detail how the new O Level was actually developed.

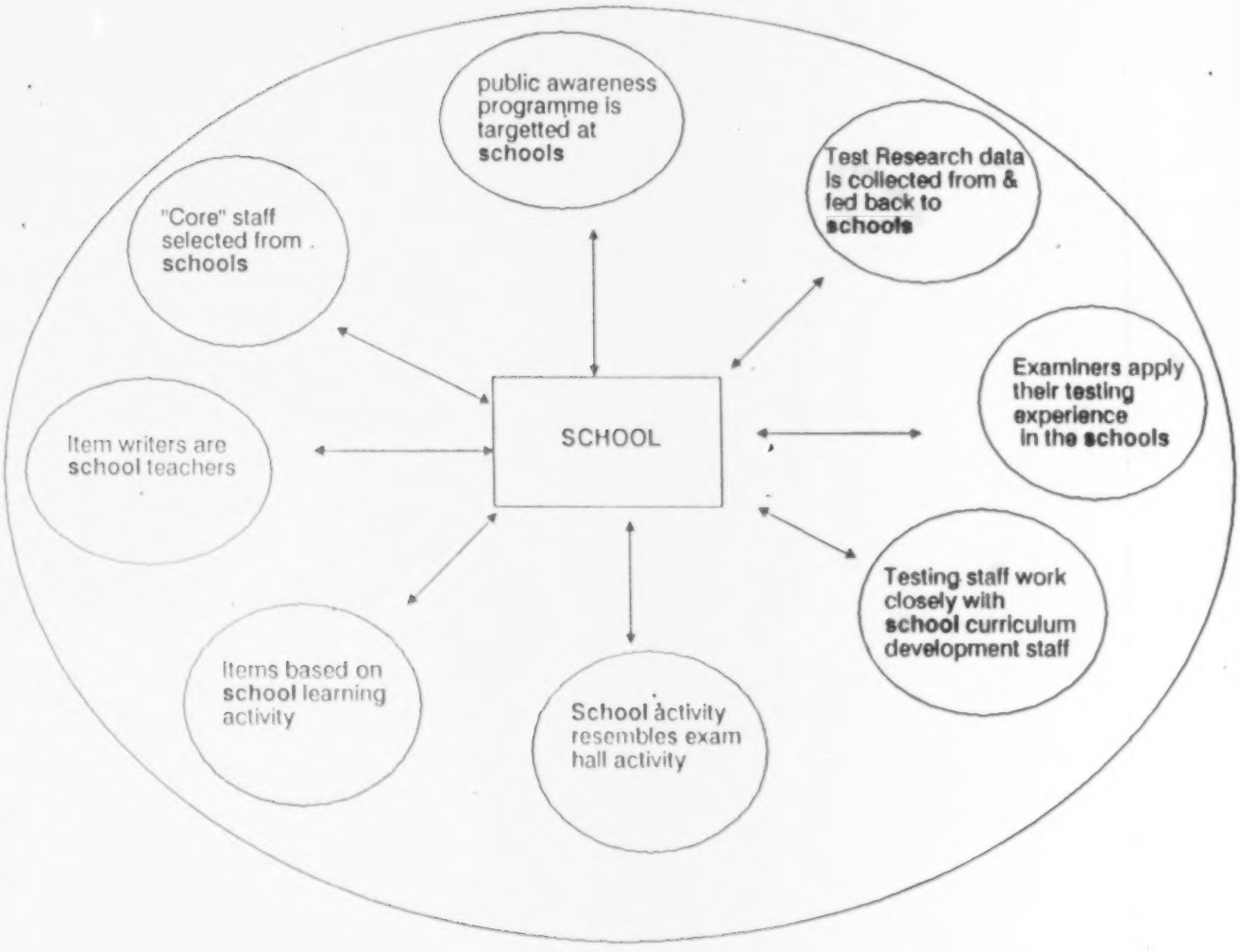
(2) DESCRIPTION OF THE NEW EXAMINATION AND ITS PRODUCTION

Thank you. Dr. Webber has described to you the background, and lead up to our new English Language O Level and I will shortly describe to you in some detail what practical measures we have taken in implementing our new exam.

But first I would like to make a general point. I think that we cannot overemphasise the importance of harmonisation of effort in our testing work. As Dr. Webber has already demonstrated in his description, curriculum development and test development in English Language have been carried out in concert in Sri Lanka. But the harmonisation of all our efforts is an aim that we are constantly striving for.

An example of this can be seen particularly clearly in the way in which our O Level Examination has - as I shall demonstrate below - been carefully integrated into the school system. This integration of examination with the school system exhibits itself in several ways and I shall now list several examples. The core staff who were trained at Lancaster to develop first the NCE and then the GCE O Level Examination were all selected directly from the schools. The item writers that we use are school-teachers currently teaching O Level students. The items themselves are closely modelled on the types of activities used in the teaching of the new syllabus in the schools. The candidates consequently recognise continuity of purpose between classroom and examination hall

The Integration of the New English O Level into the School System


public awareness programme is targetted at schools
Test Research data is collected from & fed back to schools
"Core" staff selected from schools
Examiners apply their testing experience in the schools
SCHOOL
Item writers are school teachers
Testing staff work closely with school curriculum development staff
Items based on school learning activity
School activity resembles exam hall activity

activity. Core examination staff work literally side by side with those developing the school curriculum within the National Institute for Education. Chief Examiners and Examiners are chosen from those currently teaching the New O Level syllabus in the schools and the training they receive not only equips them for their task as examiners but reinforces their understanding of the goals behind the New O Level syllabus and its examination. Extensive Research work by Lancaster University has continuously solicited information from those involved in the syllabus and examination (- candidates, teachers, invigilators, supervisors, parents etc. -). This has assisted in the production of quality control test statistics, has assisted in the training of local staff in carrying out these tasks for themselves and, most importantly, has ensured that all this data has been properly processed and disseminated to those whom it concerns, including school teachers and pupils. All this has ensured a continuous process of monitoring and improvement. My final point in this listing refers to the public awareness campaign which we have carried out. This has included two fifty-page publications distributed nationwide, an extensive programme of Regional seminars and field visits, and a series of radio broadcasts which have all attempted to integrate the examination with the school system in all its aspects.

The above examples of integration of effort are not simply intended as a parade of happy coincidences. We see integration of effort as a very important goal in itself. Such integration has two very useful results. Firstly it means that effort expended on one activity reinforces the effectiveness of related activity. Secondly this harmonisation of effort means that effort expended on each individual activity can be reduced by the degree to which the goal of that activity is shared with another activity; in other words integration of effort reduces the amount of effort needed successfully to complete our work and enables us to complete tasks despite very limited resources. However, we cannot claim always to have been successful in our desire to integrate effort, and shortcomings will be dealt with toward the end of this paper.

Now, having made a general observation on our work, I would like to get down to some detail regarding what that work actually consists of. I shall start by describing the O Level paper itself.

On the insistence of senior policy makers the examination consists of two papers; the first of one hour duration and the second of two hours duration. There is a 15 minute interval between the two papers. The paper tests only Reading and Writing but I will return to the testing of Listening and Speaking later. The paper is 'differentiated' in that Paper I consists of 'Basic' items as determined by a certain facility value range and Paper II consists of 'Intermediate' and 'Higher' items, also determined by facility value ranges. One hour is allocated to each difficulty level and the total testing time employed is therefore three hours. Within each of these three hours half an hour is allocated to writing and half an hour is allocated to reading. At the 'Basic' level this half hour might consist of five items whereas at the 'Higher' level it might consist of only one. Candidates are required to answer all questions and a time guide and number of marks per question are indicated after the rubric for each question. The number of marks is always identical to the number of minutes recommended by the time guide. Therefore, taking Papers I and II together the whole examination is divided exactly and equally in time and weighting between reading and writing and between the three levels, Basic, Intermediate and Higher. It also means, in theory at least, that no activity carries any greater or lesser percentage mark weighting than the percentage time spent by the candidate on that activity. So, our design at least, is to have an exactly balanced examination as shown in the following table.

TIME ALLOCATIONS IN TYPICAL SRI LANKAN GCE O LEVEL ENGLISH (NEW SYLLABUS)

	READING	WRITING	SKILL LEVEL	ITEM TIME IN MINUTES
PAPER I	ITEM 1		BASIC	2
	ITEM 2		BASIC	3
	ITEM 3		BASIC	5
	ITEM 4		BASIC	5
	ITEM 5		BASIC	5
	ITEM 6		BASIC	10
				TOTAL = 30
		ITEM 7	BASIC	5
		ITEM 8	BASIC	5
		ITEM 9	BASIC	10
		ITEM 10	BASIC	10
				TOTAL = 30
PAPER II	ITEM 11		INT.	5
	ITEM 12		INT.	5
	ITEM 13		INT.	10
	ITEM 14		INT.	10
				TOTAL = 30
		ITEM 15	INT.	15
		ITEM 16	INT.	15
				TOTAL = 30
	ITEM 17		HIGHER	15
	ITEM 18		HIGHER	15
				TOTAL = 30
		ITEM 19	HIGHER	30
				TOTAL = 30

CONCLUSIONS:

1. Each ability level occupies 60 minutes
2. Both skills tested (Reading and Writing) occupy 120 minutes each.
3. Each skill is tested at each ability level for 30 minutes.

Therefore: **No ability level or skill at any ability level is given more or less time than any other. The paper is "balanced."**

And now I will deal with the process undertaken to produce this paper. The items used in the final examination paper are selected from a fairly substantial pool of items written by Lancaster trained colleagues, and school-teachers co-opted for the purpose. I use the word 'pool' advisedly because we have not yet developed a properly calibrated 'item bank', although this is one of our active plans. The items in this pool are representative of the material presented in the 'English Every Day' series although the exact form of the items are not the same as any activity in the textbook series. Thus, items are classified according to whether they are Reading or Writing; what sub skill from the textbook is being tested (taking a telephone message, filling out a form, understanding a process etc.); whether they contain a text from the textbook itself or from elsewhere; what topic area in the textbook, if any, the item is covering; what text type is being used (letter, telegram, descriptive passage or whatever); what testing technique is being used (cloze, essay, etc.); what textbook rubric the item rubric is similar to or identical with; and according to whether items are classified as 'Basic', 'Intermediate' or 'Higher' as shown by trialling in a representative sample of schools.

The item classifications described above obviously closely reflect the content of the textbook. However, by a process of 'mix and match', adequate textbook coverage can be effected without creating any items too similar to any actual task in the textbook itself. If this were to happen the teachers might well try 'to teach to the paper' by attempting to predict 'which bits of the textbook will be tested this year' - a common practice in all countries. Thus, for example sub-skills, topic areas, and item types can be sampled carefully but by changing, for instance, which testing technique is used for which topic area, to test which sub-skill, the candidates and teachers cannot predict or guess that a certain bit of the textbook will be tested in a certain way.

Items are, of course, subject to a process of editing and moderation. A long process of editing, re-editing and in-house trialling takes place among core staff at the National Institute of Education before items are trialled in schools. Further editing may take place after trialling but we have not yet had time for the re-trialling of such edited items.

ITEM CLASSIFICATION

Skill Tested	:	Reading or Writing
Subskill Tested	:	i.e. Taking a telephone message, filling out a form etc.
Text Familiarity	:	i.e. Seen or unseen
Topic Area	:	i.e. Road safety, meeting tourists, TV transmission etc.
Text Type	:	i.e. Letter, telegram, descriptive passage etc
Testing Technique	:	i.e. Cloze, Essay, MCQ etc.
Rubric	:	i.e. Same as exercise (10) Book 9, similar to exercise (2), Book 3 etc.
Level	:	i.e. Basic, Intermediate, Higher

etc.

etc.

The item pool I have just described is used in sampling the 'English Every Day' syllabus to create the examination. This sample is put together as a complete examination, containing Papers I and II as described above. It is then presented to the Moderation Committee, which consists of senior officials of the National Institute of Education, an individual who might be described as the Subject Officer for English, and two co-opted teachers. (Please note that once again we see an example of the linkage between the classroom and the examining process.) This Moderation Committee holds several meetings over a period of about 1 week and decides whether or not the whole paper represents a good sampling of the textbook materials and is, in general terms, of comparable standard to the previous year's paper. Three such sessions of the sitting of the Moderation Committee have occurred since the inception of the New GCE O Level and at each such session, items have been removed and new ones added. Further, many editorial changes have been made to items which were retained. This means that, in an ideal world, all retained but edited items should be retrialled because they are, in effect, new items. It would also be sensible to trial the paper as a whole. However, for very good reasons of security this is not done. When the Moderation Committee has finalised the paper it is then typeset in-house.

I said above that I would return to the topic of the testing of Listening and Speaking. In 1986 an island-wide system of Continuous Assessment in all O Level subjects - including English - was introduced. Many advantages were apparent in this system and, from the point of view of English, the most significant of these was that it would ensure that Listening and Speaking were effectively tested and therefore were effectively taught. This Continuous Assessment was, for a while, linked to the written O Level paper described in detail above - that is, the marks for Listening and Speaking tests conducted under the CA scheme would have been combined with the Reading and Writing tests conducted in the written paper, on an equal weightage basis, to form one mark which would determine the grade awarded to the candidate. Continuous Assessment would therefore have provided a perfect lever to ensure that Listening and Speaking were indeed taught.

But sadly the Continuous Assessment scheme fell into disfavour about a year before the first administration of our new O Level and this lever was taken from our grasp. However, before this happened we produced 4 booklets, that is one for each of 4 school terms, to assist teachers in their Continuous Assessment of Listening and Speaking. Although these booklets are not now used for assessment purposes they are still used by some teachers as source books for ideas for teaching Listening and Speaking. Indeed it now seems possible that the ideas which were developed for the CA booklets may again be of value in-creating leverage for the testing of Listening and Speaking.

This gives us the opportunity to assist teachers in the preparation of such internal promotion tests with a special emphasis on ensuring a high quality in the testing of Listening and Speaking. We will then have a lever for teaching Reading and Writing through the nationally set GCE O Level examination and via a change of tack and some opportunism, a lever for teaching Listening and Speaking, through locally set internal promotion examinations. So, in short, things look set fair for effective testing of O Level English in Sri Lanka. Finally, Dr. Webber will now make some concluding generalisations. Thank you.

(3) CONCLUDING GENERALISATIONS

Thank you. In view of the title of this paper, I feel that the first question we must consider is whether or not we have indeed used our New O Level as a lever for change. I am afraid that the frank answer has to be given that we do not yet know for sure. The University of Lancaster is assisting us in an extensive 'impact study' involving a systematic phased programme of classroom observation, and when this is complete, in 1991, we will be in a better position to give a definitive answer. However, from a small amount of objective data so far analysed and from subjective

impressions gained from very many school visits, it does appear that the New O Level is beginning to have an effect on classroom practice. I think we can say that the washback effect has started to flow but it has not yet become a fully developed flood. In the lead up to the first administration in Feb. 1989,

our public awareness campaign did not have the effect that we had wished. There was even doubt as to whether a new O Level would indeed be set or whether the old format O Level only would be set. This almost certainly meant that many pupils and teachers hedged their bets and did not concentrate on the New O Level alone. This would indicate that the lever did not effect change to the extent that had been hoped. However the run up to the second administration in March '90 was free of such problems. Pupils and teachers knew from the content of the previous year's paper that they would indeed have to prepare for and sit a new O Level. In consequence our publicity campaign has been much more effective and we hope that when the data is systematically analysed, it will be evident that the New O Level has indeed had an effect on classroom practice. But whether or not our hopes are borne out by statistical evidence has yet to be seen.

Another question I would like to ask is, 'Has our campaign of public and professional awareness been adequate?' There is no doubt that our work in orienting our own immediate colleagues and in training Chief Examiners, Examiners and other examination administrators, has been extremely successful. However, when we consider the wider population of candidates, teachers and parents, then I am afraid that we have to admit that we have not been nearly successful enough. This has been a great disappointment to us. We have, as noted above, produced a fifty page orientation book of which 10,000 copies were printed and distributed island-wide. We followed this publication up with a series of workshops and seminars. We enlisted the assistance of what are termed Field Programme Assistants - that is individuals whose duty it is regularly to visit schools and keep them well informed. We also produced several radio broadcasts. But despite these efforts, when we make school visits, whether it is in Colombo or in rural

areas, we meet with depressing areas of ignorance. We are currently trying to improve the effectiveness of our awareness campaign by a re-issue of our first booklet and the distribution of a new booklet which is presented in what we hope is a more easily accessible form. We have also undertaken an even more extensive programme of teacher workshops island-wide. And we now feel that we are beginning to make some sort of an impact on the consciousness of teachers and through them their pupils. We have still not done enough to make parents and employers aware of what we are trying to achieve and this is an area that we must address soon. To sum up I would say that we underestimated the difficulty of creating mass awareness and that we are trying to correct this mistake. And indeed we would very much welcome any suggestions as to how we could improve our awareness campaign.

My final point may be regarded as the most downbeat of all but I do not regard it in that light. The point is that we can only work within the limits of the possible. This may seem a very obvious point but I believe that it is so important that we should not avoid it. In considering what might be achieved by the introduction of a new examination such as the one we have described to you today, test practioners are likely to consider what changes can be levered into place and to think in terms of ensuring high validity and reliability, in terms of improving the quality of classroom instruction and perhaps even in terms of using profiling in certification as a way of improving young people's ability to gain employment. And these would, of course, be very worthy aims. But we have learnt through experience that it is perhaps best to look at what changes can indeed possibly be effected. As we are well aware, a test that is both highly valid and highly reliable is very difficult to create. Further the quality of classroom instruction is dependent on many variables such as pay, the quality of individuals attracted to the profession, physical conditions, the social background and motivation of pupils and, of course, many others. So, it may be possible to lever in some changes in the quality of classroom instruction through the medium of a new examination, but the extent of that change will be dependent on a large variety of other variables. And finally, improving the quality of examination certification will only help young people to gain employment where such

employment exists; in countries with very low economic growth and high unemployment, no amount of certification reform will create job opportunities. It may be unpleasant to face up to limitations such as these in our work, but in doing so I believe that more realistic goals can be set and in consequence time and effort used to greater effect.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, before we conclude our paper, we would like to thank five organisations which have been essential to the effective prosecution of our work. These are the National Institute of Education, Sri Lanka, where I and my colleague Mrs. Ethel Nanayakkara work, the Overseas Development Administration of the UK and the British Council for their professional support and funding, the Dept. of Examinations, Sri Lanka and its Commissioner, Mr. Arthur Wedamulla for administering our examination and finally the University of Lancaster, in the persons of Dr. Charles Alderson and Ms. Dianne Wall for their tireless Research back-up in all we have done.

Thank you

Ethel Nanayakkara
Richard Webber
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